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# Tibet: What Is Mysterious and What Is No Longer Mysterious

By Li Youyi

*Report on the Investigation of Tibet in 1945.*

*Tibetan Buddhism Is the Mysterious Veil of Tibet.*

*The Rise of the Yellow Sect and the Introduction of the Living Buddha Reincarnation System Led to Change in the History of Tibet.*

*What Does "Living Buddha" mean? A Living Buddha Is a Man Who Has Become a Buddha. People Today Know More About Tibet.*

*The Mysterious Veil Over the Region Has Been Lifted.*



## Tibet: What Is Mysterious and What Is No Longer Mysterious

*[Li Youyi, born in 1912, is an accomplished Tibetologist. He studied Sociology at Yanjing University in the early 1930s. From 1944 to the second half of 1947, he worked in Tibet in his capacity as an official with the Lhasa Office of the Commission for Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs of the Nationalist Government. The period gave him chances to visit many of the manors and pastures in various parts of Tibet, talking to peasants and herders living at the bottom of the social strata. In the meantime, he made a comprehensive study of Tibetan religion and culture, and results of this led to the creation of this article on life in old Tibet.]*

Over a long time, Tibet was covered with a mysterious veil.

People always felt that Tibet was so far away and beyond the periphery of one's knowledge, and even that all things related to Tibet were a great mystery, so that "Mysterious Tibet" became almost a second name for the region.

However, this mysterious veil gradually was lifted after the peaceful liberation of Tibet in 1951. Tibet has now been transformed into an autonomous region where people living in a free and open society are devoting themselves to weaving an entirely new life.

This article refers to how the mysterious veil took shape and how it was lifted.

Before liberation, Tibet followed a system of strict feudal serfdom featuring a religious and temporal administration similar to that prevailing in Europe in the Middle Ages. Tibetan monks and lay rulers enjoyed a high position and lived in comfort and ease, so that they were naturally determined to maintain this system unchanged for all time. One way of achieving this was to maintain a strict closed-door policy. They tried their best to prevent external influences seeping into Tibet, fearing these would undermine their regime and jeopardize their privileged position.

As a result of long separation from the outside world, Tibetan society stagnated, the economy was backward and culture change was virtually impossible to achieve. Exploited by the feudal rulers, serfs lived a far worse life than the beasts of burden. If were not for seeing this with my own eyes, I could hardly believe the misery that Tibetan serfs were suffering.

### 1945: Memory of Social Investigation Over Tibetan Social Conditions

During the autumn and winter of 1945, I undertook an inspection tour in the Lhasa area for several months. During a journey of about 1,700 miles along the middle and lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo River, a scene of decline passed constantly before my eyes. Every day, I saw no humans, only deserted and abandoned buildings. I must have passed through more than a hundred of these “ghost towns”. We could judge from those vestiges that Tibetan population in former times was far larger than the current level. What caused Tibet to sink into such desolation?

I began my social investigations during the harvest season. At that time, even in the relatively more backward rural areas of the hinterland, one could sense the rewarding delight on peasants’ faces. Unfortunately, I could not find any such face in the Tibetan rural areas in 1945. What I could see only were the nobles and tax collectors shouting at and whipping serfs, and what I could only hear was the weeping and sighing of the latter. Although 40 years has gone since then, I can still clearly recall such dreadful scenes.

I now want to discuss various aspects. When I talked to the villagers during my social investigation tour, to my surprise, most of them were not aware that a world



*A serf with the Yangda Manor in Lhasa ploughing the field with wooden plough in old Tibet.*

CHEN ZONGLIE



war had been waging for several years. I was astonished that many places were still in the situation in which people do not visit each other all their lives, though the crowing of their cocks and the barking of their dogs are within hearing of each other. In a village called Luding in Nyingchi, I once exchanged *ula* (this refers to a kind of corvee labor imposed on the ordinary people in old Tibet, which required them to provide unpaid labor such as accommodating government officials; with the short-distance corvee called “Sachui” and the long-distance labor called “Zonggyi”)

When an old woman in her fifties approached with a horse, I chatted with her. I asked her how many people lived in the next village and whether there was any temple there. She looked up at me for a few seconds, and then explained that she had never gone there. At first, I thought she was joking or even telling a lie, because from that village to Luding was no more than three km. Then, someone standing nearby told me it was true that she had never gone there. In Tibetan rural areas, many people had never left their hometown all their lives. This did not mean those people would not like to go outside, but they were tightly shackled to the ground, and they could not move about freely without permission from the estate owners.

All Tibetan people are fond of drinking buttered tea. But in my social investigation, I found that not everyone could drink this beverage. Those penniless serfs could not drink even ordinary tea. On my tour, I discovered that nearly all the *ula* corvee laborers drank a kind of tea made with two substitutes—Begyia, referring to tea made with Qenggang oak tree bark and leaves, and Bamgyia, which was a kind of moss growing in hilly areas. The water boiled from these two kinds of substitutes looked like tea in color but without the slightest flavor of tea.

*Zanba* (roasted highland barley flour) is Tibetan people's staple food, but not all the serfs could eat it all year round. After the autumn harvest, serfs had no grain left after handing in the portion needed to pay their rent, hence they could only “borrow” back some of it from the estate owner, which would then become a new debt. In this way, the serfs were never able to pay off their debts that were passed on as a burden from one generation to the next. Some serfs could borrow a grain ration only for a half year at most from their masters and that was considered beneficent. Many serfs had to live on edible wild herbs and seeds of wild plants for at least the remaining half year.

I had wondered during my tour, why, considering that the Tibetan serfs were suffering such brutal exploitation and oppression, they did not rise up against oppression. I had asked some of them such a question. Unexpectedly, the answer was: “This is fate”. They believed that the misery they suffered in this life was because of sins they had committed in their previous incarnation; only by suffering

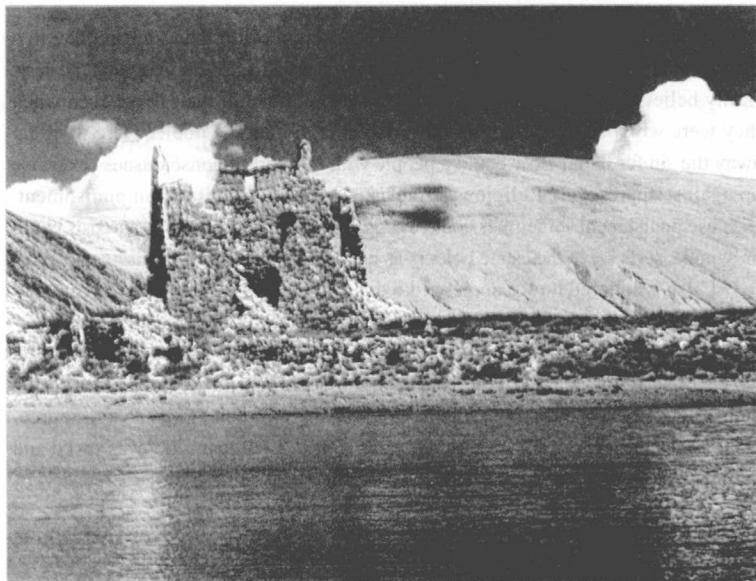
misery in this life could they wash away the sin, and could then transmigrate to a better state. That is what they had been told by their lamas and it was what the serfs firmly believed. They accumulated merits for the future all their lives, even when they were whipped by the nobles they also thought that the nobles were washing away the sin for them. How could a people with this sort of consciousness ever rise up against oppression? Religious narcosis is far more dreadful than punishment. Because punishment sometimes could evoke opposition, but religious narcosis could only make serfs serve the estate holders as beasts of burden in a submissive manner.

I also wondered how a society like this could be sustained. But, if there had been no liberation, and if there had not been Democratic Reform in 1959 that overthrew serfdom, how long would the Tibetans have had to remain chained by the fetters of serfdom? I loved Tibet's beautiful mountains and rivers, and loved the industrious Tibetans even more. I grieved for them, but when I knew that the agreement for Tibet's peaceful liberation had been signed, I felt that Tibet was saved and the Tibetans would now be able to live a new life.

### **Tibetan Buddhism Is the Mysterious Veil of Tibet**

Tibetan Buddhism is the religion of Tibet, generally called Lamaism. Buddhism was introduced into Tibet in the middle of the 7th century, and could be attributed to the arrival of Princess Wencheng of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and Princess Bribhutti of Nepal, who wed the Tibetan King Songsan Gambo. Through their influence, the Tsampo (King) was converted to Buddhism and established the Jokhang and Ramoche Monasteries, Buddhism was pitted against the original Bon religion from the beginning and this battle continued for nearly 200 years throughout the existence of the Tubo Kingdom. Buddhism grew in strength somewhat during the late Tubo Kingdom (early in the 9th century); but it was then banned by the last Tubo king under the pressure of anti-Buddhist elements. As a result, Buddhism disappeared for over 70 years in the central part of Tibet, the preceding period being known as the °the first propagation of Buddhism°±, with the Mahayana, mainly the doctrines of Padmasambhava, forming the mainstream of this period.

After the collapse of the Tubo Kingdom, a slave uprising overthrew the existing slave-based society, although new serf owners came into being subsequently. Tibetan princes all contended for hegemony during a period of 405 years, from the downfall of the Tubo Kingdom in 842 AD to the moment when Sapan, the leader of the Sagya Sect, surrendered to Mongol troops in 1247. Because the Sagya Sect was



*A desolate scene along the Yarlung Zangbo River in old Tibet.*

ZHOU XIN

the first one to pledge allegiance, the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) gave it an exceptionally warm reception. Kublai Khan, the first emperor of the Yuan Dynasty, not only granted the title of Shangshu official to Pagba, the nephew of Sapan, but also entrusted him to govern the Tibetan area. At that time, the Lhasa and Xigaze areas were grouped into thirteen '10,000-Household Offices', all of which were governed by Pagba. This was the first regime of the religious and temporal administration in Tibet.

From the middle of the 10th century, a Buddhist revival occurred that was called the re-propagation of Buddhism, featuring the rise of many religious sects, which was closely integrated with the political situation at that time when many princes contended for hegemony and sought support from one of the sects. When Mongol troops invaded Tibet, the Sagya Sect dominated, with Sapan as its leader who himself was one of the chiefs of the 10,000-Household Offices. With the blessing of the Yuan Dynasty, leaders of the Sagya Sect were the official rulers of the Tibetan area, but the other sects refused to accept this so that the struggle for dominance continued.

Thus, after dominating the scene for less than 100 years, the Sagya Sect found

itself superseded by a sect called Pagmo Zhuba, also one of the 10,000-Household Offices, who then dominated for a further 90 years.

The Pagmo tribe became the legal ruler not only by defeating the Sagya Sect in battle but also by gaining the support of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) and the succeeding Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Renbungba from the Garma Gagyu Sect then took control for about 100 years, before being replaced by Sinshaba, one of its ministers. Sinshaba, who was later called Tsangpa Khan, attempted to annihilate the forces of other religious sects and establish a regime covering the entire Tibetan area, but failed.

During this period of around 400 years from the regime led by the Sagya established by the Yuan Dynasty in the middle of the 13th century to the regime of the Yellow Sect recognized by the Mongol Kharnate Gushri Khan in the mid-17th century, there was never a unified and steady local authority in Tibet, the only unity coming from the authority of the Central Government. Except for showing allegiance to the Emperor, the religious sects never resigned themselves to being ruled by another, and each sought to do things their own way. Only the mighty Mongol troops of the Yuan Dynasty were able to quell this local turbulence from going too far. After the Ming Dynasty emerged, the relationship between Tibet and the Central Court was maintained only by conferring various honorific titles and through trade; however, the relationship was not weakened, but, rather, it was tightened.

### **How the Rise of the Yellow Sect and the Founding of the Living Buddha Reincarnation System Changed the History of Tibet**

During this period, there were two essential events worth mentioning, namely, the rise of the Yellow Sect of Tibetan Buddhism and the introduction of the Living Buddha reincarnation system, which drastically changed the history of Tibet.

The major religious sects in Tibet before the emergence of the Yellow Sect were the Nyingma, Sagya and Gagyu sects. The Sagya Sect was the first to establish the religious and temporal administration, with a very powerful lordliness at its peak.

The Gagyu Sect, with four major branches and eight minor ones, was also very powerful, represented in power by the Pagmo Sect and the Garmaba Sect, who freely mixed politics and religion with the 10,000-household offices as their base. The Sagya Sect was actually controlled by the Kun clan, who also provided all the princes of Dharma, the title being handed down from father to son, which was no different from the behavior of secular social conventional or hereditary families. The Pagmo Sect

was controlled by the Nang clan, and the hierarch and chief of the 10,000-Household Offices were all from the same family. This was pretty much the same in the other religious sects. Because the superiors of the religious sects all owned land and manors and large numbers of serfs, they lived an extravagant and dissipated life. They blurred the distinction between clergy and laity, and Buddhist doctrines were the means for them to obtain and hold on to power and wealth. All of this prevailed before the rising of the Yellow Sect.

The Yellow Sect, also called Geluba, was founded by Zongkapa (1357-1410), a monk from Qinghai, who was regarded as a great reformer. The important significance of his reformation not only lay in the purification of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, monks and priests being strictly required to follow the religious commandments, remain celibate and carefully study the religious rites, but helped Buddhism shake off the control of the powerful laity and become an independent force, which was the first effort to realize the separation of temporal and religious administration. However, Zongkapa was only able to achieve half of his reformation goals. He certainly helped the monasteries free themselves from the control of a certain family to become an independent force in their own right, but his goal of the separation of temporal and religious administration was not realized due to the political situation. The Yellow Sect eventually became the ruler of the Tibetan area by relying on the support from outside forces — namely, Gushri Khan—without which it would have been impossible for the Yellow Sect to have gained power. The Yellow Sect formally became the ruling religious sect in 1642, and this remained a fact until 1959.

### **What Does “Living Buddha” Mean? A Living Buddha Is a Man Who Has Become a Buddha**

The Living Buddha reincarnation system is a mysterious and interesting phenomenon for common people, so I will try to explain it in the following sections.

When outside China, I was often asked what a “Living Buddha” was. I answered that Living Buddha refers to a man who has become a Buddha. According to the theory of Buddhism, anyone could enter Buddhahood if he practices asceticism complying with the Catursatya — Four Axioms left by Sakyamuni. Becoming a Buddha means possessing the highest achievements, showing that one can disencumber oneself of the burdens of human existence, fully recognize the truth, be reincarnated and not enter an endless cycle of transmigration.



But is there any criterion for judging who has entered Buddhahood? In fact, there is not. However, the monks' practice of asceticism was perfectly obvious, and, if one has various noble attainments, is skilled in reciting and interpreting the sutras, is lenient, and free from common behavioral traits, such a person was believed to have entered Buddhahood. But it was not enough for this belief to come from the common people, but must be approved from a higher level.

In light of convention, the Grand Living Buddha such as the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Erdeni and the Hutugtu of the "four lings" (referring to the dwelling places of the four Grand Buddhas who are qualified to be regents in Lhasa) should be conferred the title by the Emperor of the day. The local government in Tibet was only able to confer the title to those small Living Buddhas of lesser importance.

There are many ranks of Living Buddhas. The Dalai Lama, the Panchen Erdeni, Zhebozundainba from the Outer Mongolia in the old days and Zamgya Hutugtu in Inner Mongolia ranked first; the four lings' Hutugtu ranked second; the Abbot Living Buddhas from big monasteries like Jamyang Hutugtu from the Labrang Monastery and Paglha Hutugtu from the Qamdo area ranked third. These names were recorded in the list of the Commission for Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs of the imperial court. The first three ranks could be the Grand Living Buddhas. The reincarnates from Gandain Chiba Abbot in the past dynasties ranked fourth, while Coqen Zhugu from three big monasteries in Tibet ranked fifth, Zhacang Zhugu sixth and Kamcun Zhugu seventh.

In accordance with convention, anyone who gains the Geshe degree possesses the qualification to reincarnate. Besides, it is very important to see if he accumulates wealth or controls one of the monasteries in his previous life. If truly, his disciples will find a reincarnation for him to hold on to his wealth and status. If a Geshe neither wealth nor good status, no one will find a reincarnation for him. Someone would be reincarnated for one or two generations, then he suddenly goes bankrupt, so he has to settle in "Paradise", with no further need to live in the world. There was also a kind of Living Buddha who had sufficient wealth to make donations to the local Tibetan government to obtain the title and even rise to higher rank.

There are two concepts between the Living Buddha reincarnation and the reincarnation of common people. The Living Buddha is a Buddha who does not have to undergo the process of transmigration but who chooses reincarnation in order to go on helping to deliver all living creatures from torment. As to common people's reincarnation, this goes through six transmigrations according to one's own fate, which is totally different from the Living Buddha reincarnation system.

The Living Buddha reincarnation was initially founded by Garma Gagyü, and

then it was developed into a standard inheritance system for religious upper-class figures. Because Zongkapa had established the dharma (rule) that monks had to remain celibate, this caused a problem with the inheritance of the major religious figures. Therefore, the reincarnation system could solve this problem on one hand and avoid kindred elements from gaining control on the other. If a Living Buddha passed away, no one knew where he would be reincarnated, so that a procedure of finding out the reincarnated soul boy was worked out. The process is generally as follows: practising divination, inviting deities to make prediction, examining reflections in holy lakes, searching soul boy candidates, giving them various prescribed tests, and determining the soul boy and seeking confirmation from the Central Government.

However, there are still many problems historically existing in the system of reincarnation. This is because only those upper – class lamas with great power and status, especially the Living Buddhas of the first and second ranks mentioned above, being rulers with great power, needed to be reincarnated. When those lamas passed away, relevant people, especially nobles, wished to see the Living Buddha reincarnated in their own family to help enlarge and consolidate their power.

Meanwhile, Living Buddhas of the third and fourth ranks would try their best to be reincarnated into the families of nobles, in the hope that this would help with enhanced social status. This phenomenon had become so common that the emperors of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) had to set up the system of determining the soul boy by drawing a lot from a golden urn to prevent any fraudulent reincarnation. However, this system still could not thoroughly avoid problems, Emperor Qianlong ordered that Zhebozundainba be reincarnated not in Mongolia but at the foot of the Potala Palace in Lhasa, a place called “Xoi” in the following parts. As a result, in Outer Mongolia, the most important Living Buddha at that time was freed from being controlled by the nobles and maharajas.

The Central Court in previous dynasties had tried vainly to make the system of reincarnation impartial and reasonable, free from the control of certain forces. But it was not possible to break the firm alliance between clergy and nobles without any change in the main system of religious and temporal administration.

Zongkapa had been aware of the inheritance problem when he founded the Yellow Sect, so he set up the inheritance law of Gandain Chiba Abbot, who was master of the Yellow Sect. Zongkapa, the founding master, ordered that, if one wanted to be a Gandain Chiba Abbot, he had to finish the Open School and the five sutras sequentially in the big monasteries, then obtain the Laramba Geshi degree, and go on to study Tantricism in the Upper Tantric School or the Lower Tantric School.



Common lamas would first move up to a Wenze (the lama who leads recitation of sutras), then on to Kampus (abbot of the Tantric school); then, he would be an alternate personage for Gandain Chiba Abbot. A person who finished the Upper Tantric School was called Shaze Qoigy, and one who finished the Lower Tantric School was called Jamzi Qoigy. Most of the lamas who struggled up to Qoigy (referred to as the Prince of Dharma) were by then bent with age and they really deserved their reputations as men of learning. From the aspect of religious position, they were higher than the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Erdeni, but they had no political power, so they had to be subject to the power of the religious and temporal administration headed by the Dalai Lama.

Seen from the system of monasteries founded by Zongkapa, he had not advocated adoption of the system of reincarnation, but this was developed by his disciples instead. Why did the disciples do so? It was because the system could meet the demand of religious leaders to ensure continuity and the stability of their authority



*Serfs with the Pali Manor paying corvee labor in 1951.*

CHEN ZONGLIE







*In old Tibet, Xigaze town teemed with beggars.*

CHEN ZONGLIE

during the fierce power contests. The 14th Dalai Lama, now living in exile abroad, made a penetrating explanation of this. He said that the system of the Dalai Lama's came into being because of need. If there was no requirement for such a system in society, it would not survive. He had more than once declared in public that he was the last generation of the Dalai Lamas, though he was universally called the God King, he described himself as a common monk. In 1986, when I talked with him in Dharamsala in India, I said he had really entered Buddhahood. He replied: "You are wrong, I am not a Buddha. I am still a human being". That he could speak out such words indicated his realm of a Buddha.

### **People Today Know More About Tibet and the Mysterious Veil Over the Region Has Been Lifted**

As I mentioned in the beginning, the aim of this article is to discuss how the mysterious veil took shape and how it was lifted. Why we called it mysterious is because people had little knowledge of Tibet due to the long isolation in the past.